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## **The tall building complex. Twenty-two dead - 9 jumped, 13 burnt - is the minimum body count**

Do we need the Lahore Development Authority (LDA) Plaza? And why not to build tall

Tuesday 14 May 2013, by [Bin RASHID Hashim](#) (Date first published: 13 May 2013).

*"Every city I go to is a huge building site for capitalist surplus absorption" - David Harvey*

Twenty-two dead - 9 jumped, 13 burnt. This is the minimum body count of the fire at the seventh to ninth floors of the Lahore Development Authority (LDA) Plaza on Egerton Road. The 11-storey building housed the headquarters of the LDA: the director general was stationed there and the bulk of the paper work pertaining to the agency was kept in its closets. What was contained in the burnt papers shall be anyone's guess.

Speculation is rife within the bureaucracy that it was an inside job. "Remember there was a similar fire when the last Punjab government was dismissed," is what one insider told me. "That time the fire remained controlled. This time, they've done it again, but it went out of hand." The LDA plaza, a site I have visited much during research on urbanization patterns in Lahore, was built without fire exits. Perhaps that can be spared in the presence of the staircase to complement the elevators, but that the LDA, whose purpose is "to be an accountable principal planning and development vehicle of the Lahore Metropolis," built an eleven-storey headquarters for itself two decades ago in a city that, as of 2013, only had the fire fighting capacity to reach seven storeys is criminal.

A fire in a high-rise building in Lahore would not an unusual event. Those aware of the shoddy monitoring of construction by-laws are fairly aware not to except much precaution has been taken in most of the high-rises that have become an eyesore on the metropolis's skyline over the last three decades. But when the fire engulfs the head office of the city's building laws monitor, the questions over the health of each of the city's high-rises needs to be asked.

The first high-rise in Lahore was built before the LDA was put in place. Noted urban geographer David Harvey says, "in the 1960s, cities underwent an existential crisis." Lahore was suffering from the same in the 60s when its first high-rise, the Alfalah Building, was constructed on the Mall in 1964. Since then, urban developers have looked to the sky as the place to go to fill up their coffers.

The urban landscape of Lahore has been radically transforming. But the trend to build high really kicked off in the 1990s and saw its peak between 2002 and 2007, when easy bank finance was made available to those who cuddled up to the dictator General Musharraf and the so-called king's party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q). But those building plazas have not been limited to those in power. Capitalists affiliated with all political parties and the establishment have been lend a "helping hand" from banks to build high - and the LDA has traditionally played the poodle well.

The matter got so out of hand that in 2009, the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SC) ordered the demolition of 147 illegally constructed plazas and demolishing the upper floors of another 102. An inquiry was led into the matter. At least two of the LDA officials being investigated committed

suicide during the investigations. The final report on illegally constructed plazas in Lahore was never made public, with estimated ranging that the number ranged from the almost 300 that were completely or partially demolished to over 500. A number of plazas were alleged to have been spared due to “political connections” or “paying the right people.” The demolitions stopped when the DCO during the time, Sajjad Bhutta, was replaced by Ahad Cheema, a grade 18 official appointed to the grade 20 post, later rewarded with the post of the LDA director general, where he is still stationed.

The process of financing a multistory plaza is quite simple: secure a bank loan to cover the construction, sell or rent some of the rooms, flee or default on the loan. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) will follow by waiving off your debt.

The example of the Ahad Tower on the former Kalma Chowk, remains the go to example for plazas that never reached their completion. More than 650 small entrepreneurs who had invested Rs1.8 billion in purchasing small shops and offices at the Ahad Tower are still awaiting compensation after the government declared the plaza “illegal and against building by-laws.” The owners, the then PML-Q MPA Abdul Ahad Malik, managed to secure bails and has not been made accountable.

The Ahad Tower story is one of the few that the media has chosen to focus on after the fall of the PML-Q government in Punjab. Property developers and estate agents insist that average plaza occupancy remains at below 20 per cent – except the densely occupied Shah Alam market. In Shah Alam, where they cannot go higher, they dig deeper, with plazas going four stories deep not uncommon. Fulfilling safety standards, including fire safety and provision of air ducts is non-existent, as expected. All of this has gone on under the nose of the LDA. And the new phase of constructions in the area, including a seven-storey parking plaza and a number of eight to 12 storey buildings, has not undergone review, despite the massive fire that broke out in one of the plazas in February, 2011, where the blaze took over two days to be put out.

Despite all of this, the trend to build high, and claim it is “development,” remains in place. Noted architect and conservationist, Pervaiz Vandal wrote, “cities are left to the mercy of bureaucracies and ‘experts’.” Speculative capitalists must be added to the matrix. In fact, the logic must be reversed: city bureaucracies function in service to speculative capitalists. If not, then what else is to explain the fact that almost all high-rise construction and new housing societies built, are built with the backing of the “invisible hand of the LDA.”

This is why questions are being asked regarding the origin of the LDA Plaza fire; in which files relating to over Rs1.5 trillion worth of cases against LDA officials were reported to have been burnt and NAB inquiry had been launched into the Rs30 billion Metro Bus Service.

But two more fundamental questions need to be asked. The first is: why build high? Only this year did Malik Riaz and Bahria Town announced an agreement with the UAE based Sheikh Nayan to build the world’s highest building in Karachi, with over \$40 billion reported to be “invested.” The so-called agreement was immediately scrapped by the Abu Dhabi-based construction company, but it merits attention that no opposition to the plan to build the “world’s tallest building in Pakistan” were raised. On the converse, there appeared to be excitement regarding it. In Lahore, the multi-billion dollar project to build the Al-Mubarak Centre, a 52-storey skyscraper, in the centre of the ever-expanding Lahore metropolis was abandoned by the Sharif government. The PML-Q still grudges over it.

The second is: why have the LDA? The point made earlier needs to be repeated: if agencies like the LDA are a way of making urban development bow to the whims of speculative capitalist, and not deliver safe, livable cities to their inhabitants, then we might as well stop wasting public funds over

running them.

When the left-wing Venezeulan president Hugo Chavez died earlier this year, AFP ran a story titled, "Chavez wasted oil wealth on housing the poor, instead of building skyscrapers." The story advocated the model that our Muslim brothers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Qatar have turned to. Should one not choose housing for the poor over building a high-rise? The priority of a city planning agency should be to provide affordable housing and commercial space and implement safety standards.

The question to ask is: can the LDA deliver such? If not, it makes sense to replace it with a people-friendly alternative.

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\* <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/05/13/comment/columns/the-tall-building-complex/>

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